When I first heard about this guy who was a new student in the English Department, I thought, “Ok, whatever.  It’s not like I’m ever going to meet him or anything.  I’m a junior, and he’s just a freshman.”  But I was wrong.  I saw him almost every other day because he hung around the same places that my friends and I did.  I’m not going to lie:  I was relieved when I didn’t see him around.  I know it sounds harsh, but things were just easier.  It was so awkward when he would try to talk to me.  Short phrases and made up meetings or classes got me out of there pretty quickly.  A part of me always felt bad.  But I just didn’t want to be around this kid.   
  
As teachers, our goal is to equitably provide language education to all of our students. This is not accomplished in a vacuum, however. Encompassing our times of pure education and student growth we are surrounded by a school culture that springs up. This culture is created and shaped by an ever advancing horde of youth with their fads, opinions, rough edges, immaturities, romances, and peer groups. How might we contribute to this world? We are more powerful than we think.   
  
*Miranda, Ella, and I have known each other since the first grade....  Throughout middle school, Miranda, Ella, and I were pretty much our own little group.  Somewhere between super popular and well-liked....  This is why I haven’t understood what’s been going on with us lately, now that we’re actually in high school.  It’s nothing like how I thought it would be. (p 92)*  
  
*Since Miranda’s always been really good about calling us as soon as she got home from summer camp, I was a little surprised when I didn’t hear from her....  I ended up not seeing Miranda or Ella until the first day of school.  And, I have to admit, I was shocked.  Miranda looked so different:  her hair was cut in this super-cute bob that she’d dyed bright pink, of all things, and she was wearing a striped tube top that (a) seemed way inappropriate for school, and (b) was totally not her usual style.  Miranda had always been such a prude about clothes, and here she was all pink-haired and tube-topped.  But it wasn’t just the way she looked that was different:  she was acting differently, too.  I can’t say she wasn’t nice, because she was, but she seemed kind of distant, like I was a casual friend.  It was the weirdest thing in the world. (pp 93-4)*  
  
*Never in my life have I been considered one of the “popular” girls in anything, but that summer in camp, for whatever reason, I was the girl everybody wanted to hang out with....  They said they liked my hair (though they changed it).  They said they liked the way I did my makeup (though they changed that, too).  They showed me how to turn my T-shirts into halter tops.  We smoked.  We snuck out late at night and took the path through the woods to the boys’ camp.  We hung out with boys.*   
  
*When I got home from camp, I called Ella right away to make plans with her.  I don’t know why I didn’t call Via.  I guess I just didn’t feel like talking about stuff with her.  She would have asked me about my parents, about camp.  Ella never really asked me about things.  She was an easier friend to have in that way.  She wasn’t serious like Via.  She was fun.  She thought it was cool when I dyed my hair pink.  She wanted to hear all about those trips through the woods late at night.  (pp 237-8)*  
  
Enter a young student with an obvious difference. This child is instantly vulnerable in the school culture because many young people can be harsh and unwelcoming of difference, particularly when it is unfamiliar. One obvious difference can define an individual in the culture’s eyes, leaving the rest of their selves, perhaps totally normal, unnoticed.   
  
*Here’s what I think:  the only reason I’m not ordinary is that no one else sees me that way.  (p 3)*  
  
His name is Jacob, and he has more syndromes than I can remember. Sometimes I’ll be working with his family and Jacob will lay on the floor kicking and screaming while his dad tries desperately to control him. Jacob is in high school. Those of us around keep working, pretending not to notice, and carry on friendly chatter. Later Jacob’s dad will come to us and apologize: for his son, for his failure to handle the situation well. “No, it’s no problem at all. How are you doing?” How do you respond to a man apologizing for a situation--for a son--he has little control over?   
  
As teachers, we have the special calling to both treat these differences honestly and bring out the rest of the person. By modeling to the rest of the students the ability to see a person for who they are, and not as a single characteristic (whether good, bad, or neutral), we may be able to soften and change young people’s understanding.   
  
*But how do we do that?  How do we measure something like greatness?  Again, there’s no yardstick for that kind of thing.  How do we even define it?...  “Greatness,” wrote Beecher, “lies not in being strong, but in the right using of strength....He is the greatest whose strength carries up the most hearts.” (p 304)*  
  
Until I met Jacob I did not understand disability much. It felt foreign, intimidating. Even more I see the weight and struggle it can cause on a constant, daily basis, but I’ve also had the privilege to see the joy it brings. I see Jacob hug his brother; I hear him congratulate me on my marriage, shaking my hand at least five times throughout the wedding day; I hear his heartfelt expression asking his dad why he can’t be “normal”. Knowing Jacob has shown me the wonder a person can have when they know a side of life I don’t know. I now understand why, when presented with a choice in medication that might help many of his symptoms but change his personality, his parents say, “We don’t want to lose our son.”   
  
A year went by with the same routine, the same feelings towards this guy.  But he stopped saying much.  I guess he finally found his niche.  And slowly I had my group of friends back, usually uninterrupted.  And it even got to the point where I didn’t mind him.  I still wouldn’t go out of my way to say anything to him.  But I suddenly had a lot fewer meetings and classes to attend.   
  
Flash forward six months.  My fraternity’s Rush Week, the time when people express interest in membership.  And guess who is there—English Department guy.  A part of the membership process is interviewing each active member.  I knew I would have to have an interview with him at some point, and I was not looking forward to it.  But once we sat down in the student center over coffee and started talking, I realized that he’s like everyone else.  He wasn’t strange, wasn’t weird, and nothing felt awkward.  In fact, that was my favorite interview with anyone.  Ever.    
  
*Suddenly I wasn’t known for what I’d always been known for, but for this other thing that had happened. (p 282)*  
  
We voted him into the fraternity.  Initiation night was a great experience.  Seeing the smile on his face told me that things had changed.  He wasn’t that guy anymore.  He was a new member of my fraternity.  And everyone knew it.  
  
Our actions can have a positive effect on both the individual with the difference and the community who misunderstands and misrepresents them. The individual can experience acceptance, normalcy, and inclusiveness through us and the community can learn understanding, kindness, and compassion. This puts us in an important position in this culture of youth.   
  
*Everyone in the world should get a standing ovation at least once in their life because we all overcometh the world. (p 313)*